

VZCZCXRO7818
PP RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #3701/01 3291254
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 241254Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0520
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003701

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: KARBALA RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: PREPARATORY LEVEL

REF: A. BAGHDAD 3651
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 2492

This cable is Sensitive but Unclassified; not for Internet Distribution.

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Karbala has seven Islamic preparatory academies, whose all-male students often go on to attend one of the 21 religious schools comprising the Hawza, or seminary center, in Najaf. The academies provide free education to their students, some of whom also receive room and board. Entry is competitive, although one of the academies guarantees placement for boys whose families provide substantial endowments. End Summary.

Shi'a Seven

[1](#)2. (U) As an adjunct to our primer on the nature and structure of Karbala's religious authority (ref A), we provide the following report on religious education in the province. We canvassed a variety of contacts, official and unofficial, religious and secular, in its compilation. We have eschewed sourcing attributions for the sake of brevity.

[1](#)3. (U) There are seven Islamic preparatory academies in Karbala Province. All are primary- or secondary-level institutions that inculcate their exclusively male pupils with the fundamentals of twelver-Shi'a Islam. Each school was either founded by or is affiliated with an ayatollah or other senior Iraqi Shi'a religious figure; all but one of the latter are members of the Marja'iyah -- or theological authority -- presided over by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Graduates from these academies often, but not always, go on to attend one of the 21 religious schools comprising the Hawza (seminary center) in Najaf.

Top-Drawer

[1](#)4. (U) The smallest and most prestigious of the seven academies -- and consequently the most difficult to enter -- is the al-Husayniyah Kindergarten operated by al-Sistani's Karbala office. It is the only one of the seven without boarding facilities. Its 60 students come from the cream of provincial society and almost always subsequently attend religious boarding schools in Najaf. Although tuition is free, wealthier parents are expected to contribute to a scholarship fund that enables a handful of middle-class boys (generally the sons of clerics) to attend the academy. Imam of the al-Husayn Shrine Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i formally is in charge but delegates day-to-day operations to a headmaster.

[1](#)5. (U) Second in prestige is the al-Abbasiyah Academy. As with the remaining academies, it is a grades 1-10 school that accepts Iraqi boys from all levels of society whose parents are "good Muslims" and who demonstrate an aptitude for religious study. Approximately 300 students attend, two-thirds of whom are boarders. Funded entirely by

contributions to the al-Abbas Shrine, the academy is directed by Ahmad Jawad Nour al-Safi, the shrine's imam.

Mid-Level

¶6. (U) Four academies comprise the middle tier of religious schools in Karbala. Less selective than the al-Husayniyah Kindergarten and the al-Abbasiyah Academy, they are tuition-free but permit parents of under-qualified boys to enroll their sons on a probationary basis in consideration for non-refundable endowments. The Sayyid al-Shaheed Academy and the Faqih Husayn al-Sadr School are affiliated with Ayatollah Husayn Isma'il al-Sadr, imam of the Mukhayam Mosque, who also administers several of Najaf's 21 religious schools. With nearly 500 students each, they are the largest of the academies in Karbala. They also reputedly are the most liberal in terms of doctrine; al-Sadr -- no relation to Muqtada al-Sadr, whose supporters controlled the Mukhayam Mosque during 2003-04 -- is known as a proponent of dialogue and reconciliation.

¶7. (U) Karbala's Scientific Knowledge Academy is affiliated with several religious schools in Najaf operating under the auspices of the al-Shirazi Library, whose namesake -- Ayatollah Mohammad ibn Mahdi al-Shirazi -- died in 2001. Many of its 267 students are Iraqis of Persian descent. It is administered by Husayn al-Amri, director of the al-Shirazi office in Karbala, under the supervision of Sadiq Husayni al-Shirazi, the late Ayatollah's brother. The Imam al-Qa'im Academy has approximately 375 students. Their studies are supervised by Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi al-Modarresi, who also

BAGHDAD 00003701 002 OF 002

runs at least one religious school in Najaf.

Bottom Rung

¶8. (SBU) Radical cleric Mahmoud al-Hassani al-Sarkhi, who is not a member of the Marja'iyah, established the al-Sarkhi Islamic Institute in 2005. At 103 students, the academy is Karbala's second-smallest. The poor reputation of its founder makes it by far the least-prestigious, but admission is guaranteed if parents provide hefty endowments.

¶9. (SBU) Formerly a student of Ayatollah Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr -- Muqtada's father, who was assassinated in Najaf in 1999 -- al-Sarkhi has alienated many here by claiming to have communed with the Hidden Imam (ref B) and by asserting theological preeminence over al-Sistani. His vociferous opposition to the U.S. presence in Iraq, criticisms of Iranian influence, and condemnation of erstwhile ally Muqtada also have drawn flak, while deadly clashes between his now-defunct militia -- known as Husayn's Army -- and Iraqi and coalition forces in 2006 produced warrants for his arrest. Al-Sarkhi remains in hiding. The Institute is run by his former spokesman, Haider al-Abadi, who is not the Da'wa Party-affiliated Iraqi Council of Representatives member of the same name.

¶10. (SBU) (Note: Although in hiding for the past three years, on November 21 Sarkhi issued a strongly written fatwa urging his followers to participate in the upcoming provincial elections. End note.)

CROCKER